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Private Schools - Blessing or a curse?

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Abstract: This research paper aims at identifying the reasons of the mushroom growth of the private schools in Pakistan and the difference between the private and government owned schools with respect to the facilities and quality of education they provide. The fee structures are not taken into account as they vary among private schools according to the location they are working in and the strata or class they are catering for. The latest trend observed is that the rural areas are also joining the race and middle class is also contributing to this rise in trend incorporating necessary adaptation to local environment. In developed countries like USA contribution of private schools is high in secondary and tertiary education while in developing countries like India and Pakistan, private schools are contributing more towards primary education. Private schools are mainly established in the houses but some elite schools have shifted to the jargon of purpose-built campus, quality education, foreign qualified teachers and placement in the foreign universities etc. But the fact remains eminent that private schools have improved the enrollment percentage at primary level, managed to give better physical facilities to students and have produced a higher level of learning outcomes.

Key words: Private schools, education, student enrolment, class difference, teacher incentives.

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1. Introduction

Pakistan has suffered the dilemma of low literacy rate and extremely low enrolment at primary level from the time of its inception. The education landscape changed as the time passed and the enrolment rate for children (5-9 Years) increased from 42% to 57 % in a decade 1999-2009 (PSLM-2008-2009). The gender parity index has also changed marking a shift in education trends and reducing the gender gap. The education system of Pakistan suffers many problems and all of them cannot be addressed in one go (De Talance, 2017). Low enrolment, poverty, cultural barriers for sending girls to school, religious and cultural issues, security problems, lack of school buildings, lack of basic facilities like drinking water and lack of qualified teachers and the schools located far away are few to mention (Harma, 2016).

The terms government and public schools refer to a large arena of school types. There are private schools teaching international curriculum and producing students who can compete at international level coming down to those schools whose pupil can barely read and write. One type of school is where students are sitting on floor in barely lit rooms being taught by underpaid unwilling teachers teaching with minimum resources to class apart schools, where kids enjoy the facilities of central cooling and heating (Richardson, 2018).

Education is considered to be a service provided by the government to all the citizens without any discrimination and consideration of affordability. It is seen mainly as government's responsibility. Following this ideology, nationalization of all education institutions was done in 1972 but this strategy fired back and interrupted the role of private schools especially at elementary level. Government owned 93% of all primary schools and 88 % of the middle schools (Arshad, Farooq & Sultana, 2016). This strategy failed as government had serious budget and governance constraints which can be witnessed even now. This negative experience of government schools gave a reason to parents to shift their children to private schools after the end of nationalization in 1979 (Rahman & Jebran, 2015). Parents had a poor experience regarding inadequate basic facilities and learning outcomes. Public sector gathered impetus and started working again, for sure it was for the economic benefits but it did make a difference to the gloomy picture of Pakistan's education statistics. Though it is still not up to the mark but the percentages are on increase (Stern, 2015).

Beginning in 1990s there has been a boom in private schools as a money minting industry due to tax holiday and lack of any legislation. According to the report of Institute of social and policy sciences (2010) the number increased to a dramatic level to more than 70,000 with particularly increased bent towards middle and high level schools in both rural and urban areas. Today the private school can be termed as organizations that work for profit. They are fee-based autonomous bodies owned by private entrepreneurs that enjoy freedom from any government regulations (Harma, 2016). They vary in structure according to the environment and cultural context and their working strategies also differ taking into account what class they are catering and if they are working in a posh or poor area. Usually, private schools are located in the houses without any provision of playgrounds etc. They charge in the name of those facilities provided to the students which lack in public schools – proper drinking water, sanitation, rooms and furniture and depending upon the class they are catering provisions of room coolers/AC in summers and heaters in winter is also a priority (Mirbahar, Ghumro, Abidi & Shah, 2016).

The schools in rural areas offer low-fee structure to ensure maximum number of students and schools in urban cities mint money using the jargon of purpose built campus, quality education, foreign qualified teachers, placement in foreign universities and congenial environment (Stern, 2015). Though the different categories of private schools have created a "Class Divide" and middle class is being crushed under the financial implications of sending their children to these elite schools just to become acceptable in the society. Education is not important any more- the name of the school is what carries all the importance. The reason for this compulsion is that our education sector is neglected by the government and does not provide any competition to the growing network of private schools and colleges (De Talance, 2017)..

Surveys conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of statistics (PSLMS survey 2011) and PIHS survey (1999) are used in the study to make assessments for the level of contribution of private schools in improving overall condition. These surveys ask about the school going children above the age 4. Then ask about the type of school they attend and the grade attended. Other characteristics include gender, family income, education of the family head, household location, number of school going children etc (Arshad, Farooq & Sultana, 2016). Results of the surveys show that participation of private schools is more in rural areas as compared to the urban areas. For ages 6-10 it is 13 versus 43 %. Government schools exhibit opposite trend. For same age group it is 50 versus 35 %. Gender gap is measured to be 8 % in government schools that almost stay the same in case of private schools as well keeping in view the factors of family income and gender discrimination (Harma, 2015).

The 2000 MGD goals have given a new dimension to the efforts being made in the education sector. In this paper the difference between the physical facilities provided by the private and public schools is analyzed along with the level of the quality of learning they are providing (Srivastava & Noronha, 2016). Statistics show that private schools have a major contribution towards the large number of enrolments and they are providing quality education to different classes of our society and surely are providing better physical facilities to students. The learning outcomes are also different tilting the scale toward private schools but do we really require private sector to help government through with the education problems? Should private schools be allowed to mint money in the name of quality education without facing any legal repercussions for that? Are they a blessing as they are imparting quality education and sharing the load of government or a curse for parents who suffer strong economic burden for paying the huge fill bills for a provision that falls under government's responsibilities? (Wilkins, 2016).

2. Literature Review

“Unfortunately, Pakistan’s track record in literacy and education has not been satisfactory. The education system in the country is characterized by low literacy rate, low gross and net enrolment at all levels, high dropout rate from schools, a wide disparity at gender and regional level and a poor quality of education (State Bank of Pakistan, 2004-5).

We inherited a tainted education system from the British legacy that was unable to suffice for our needs (Andrabi, 2002). After independence the scenario of education kept changing. New schools were built and the enrolment level kept rising. Rise in enrolment levels has also decreased the gender parity index giving a positive trend to gender equality and female education. Apart from the government schools, education is delivered through many non-profit institutions, private profit oriented schools and other religious and secular schools. This resulted in increased outreach in rural and urban areas (Andrabi, Das & Khuwaja, 2008). According to the National education census NEC 2005, 33 % of the total children enrolled in Pakistan study in private schools. Pakistan population under age 16 is increasing and according to the 18th amendment Act 2010 government has a huge task of enrolling all the children below 16 in schools and providing them with quality education.

With the magnanimous growth of private schools, government needs to collaborate with private sector for the management of quality of education and school environment (Harma, 2015). This will bring them on the same page regarding the provision of basic facilities and learning outcomes. Education plays an integral part in the building of nations. 21st century has made education a core requirement for developing nations due to the competitive environment regarding technology etc (Srivastava & Noronha, 2016). Among the Two major streams of education prevalent in Pakistan, private schools are getting more acceptances due to the quality of education they are providing and are for sure making a baseline for a sustained progress and development of the country (Awan, 2014).

Different strategies are adopted by the schools in rural and urban areas to ensure profit making. In rural areas private schools are built in the form of community schools where no age limit is followed for the enrolment. Data from the PIHS survey (2001) gives clear information about the school fee with reference to its location. Surveys conducted also threw light on the salaries of the teachers working in different schools. All this information starting from the enrolment till the salaries of the teachers complete the balance sheet of a typical private school. Keeping in view the rules of economics, profit-schools can survive on low fee only if their costs are kept low. This is ensured by encouraging coeducational schools at least at primary level and by hiring

teachers at low salary (Aslam, 2009). Private schools are notorious for hiring teachers at extremely low wages. As it is the main expenditure of running the school so cost of delivery of education reduces. Private schools tend to hire local, young, single, less or moderately educated and untrained teachers at very low salaries. The private schools in villages are not primarily madrassas or religious schools. Studies show that madrassas play a very small role in the development of education sector in Pakistan with a share of less than 1% (Heyneman & Stern, 2015).

Private schools in cities work at different angle. They are providing quality education but at a very high cost. They provide facilities like equipped class rooms, technology based learning and qualified teachers but charge very high fee for this jargon (Richardson, 2018). Pakistan's middle class struggles a lot to take economic pressure of the high fee structures to get acceptance in their social circles. Now, the most fearful thing is that they are bringing in the culture of getting foreign education in the children of age 16-18 years. This phenomenon will contribute to brain drain and we will lose the cream of our intelligence to the foreign countries. Children leaving Pakistan in this age seldom wish to return after staying abroad for more than six years (Ahmed, Veinhardt, & Hemani, 2016).

How many children go to private schools and what percentage attends government school can give a clear picture of the contribution of private schools. Data to answer this question is taken from surveys conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of statistics (PSLMS survey 2011). Some Data from PIHS survey (1999) is also used to make assessments. We see a marked decrease in the percentage of (11-16) year old school going children due to the drop outs. Jimenez and Tan (1985, 1987) marked that the mushroom growth of private schools did improve the enrolment rate and quality of education to an extent but a large number of population still couldn't benefit from them. The studies have found exclusion of girls in rural areas most upsetting. Though the private schools have started working in rural areas as well, surely with different dynamics, that has divided the private schools into still more categories. Some strategically asking for low fee to get more enrolment and the other with high tuition fee "branding the education" (Awan & Zia, 2015).

Private school students are more likely to be male, coming from wealthier households, educated parents and from households with lesser number of children. Female participation is more in private schools in case of educated parents and wealthy households (Aslam, 2009). Findings show that 1/5th of the children go to private schools which make it 1/3rd of total students excluding the children that never go to school. These results indicate that private schools have a very important place in the education system of Pakistan. Private schools have improved the access to education and have shown improvement in quality as well. The only thing that lacks is the protection of consumer and staff rights in case of private schools. Providing these and ensuring the fair and effective competition to promote private school entry, growth and performance can harness the unleashed entrepreneurs (Amjad, 2012).

Numerous studies show the cost effectiveness of private schools in providing at least the minimum required physical facilities and better quality of education as compared to government schools if we keep "Elite schools" at one side as they cater totally different strata of society (Mirbahar, Ghumro, Abidi & Shah, 2016). Government school teachers enjoy relaxations at the policy level, high salaries and job security in contrast to the private school teachers who are at the mercy of the private entrepreneurs. Sometimes the teachers don't even show up for months and nobody is there to question them (Aslam 2003). Even with fewer resources, the private schools that are established in small houses provided better outcomes due to the presence of the

teacher only. The strength of these schools is that they are locally available at low fee structure, provide better facilities and show improved learning outcomes as compared to the government schools. "It's a reality that private schools started off as an urban phenomenon and catered for the elite class only, now they have mushroomed in almost every sector of the society including the rural areas as well" (Khwaja 2002). They adapt quickly to the local needs and set to maximize their benefit but do contribute to the education sector as well. They are productive for providing the better learning standards. Difference in the productivity of the private schools may vary according to their location as other factors like parental education and overall culture of the vicinity does make a difference. Private schools are never found less effective than government schools in any statistical data. Only disappointing factor that has been noticed is that girls remain at disadvantage when it comes to paying of high fee as low income families always preferred boys over them (Ali, 2017).

Drawback of private sector is that it does not operate in the areas where there is no profit, so far flung rural areas are still barred from education. Only government can access there and improve the prevailing condition for both genders (Aslam 2007). Another factor that needs consideration is that no doubt private sector is doing a great job in raising the standards of facilities and learning outcomes, they have raised the issues of equity. A socio economic disparity has been created in the families of the children who send their children to private and government schools. A new point of concern is raised in the past few years that increased number of private schools and increased number of enrolment does not mean that quality or standard of education is also improving(Awan & Saeed, 2012) Following different curriculums and relying upon untrained teachers has stopped the upward movement of learning standards. Intervention of state is required to ensure the uniformity of subject matter, standards and quality of teaching in these schools. Private educational institutions are playing key role not only in eradicating illiteracy but also enhancing the level of students as well as teachers by providing better academic environment. Private sector contributed significantly in eradicating illiteracy in the emerging economies. If private schools are managed properly they can uplift educational standard in Pakistan as well (Awan, 2012).

3. Methodology

The methodology used is descriptive review study. Data to answer the relevant questions regarding enrolment is taken from surveys conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of statistics (PSLMS survey 2011). Some Data from PIHS survey (1999) is also used to make assessments. Annual Status of Education Report Pakistan (2010) is being used as a baseline document for analyzing the difference between the state of physical facilities and the quality of learning in the private and public schools of Islamabad. Linear probability model was used to check if the learning level is different due to studying in a different school. Schools of the same vicinity were taken to make comparison of government and private school learning outcomes, keeping government school as benchmark. Schools of Islamabad were targeted to mark the differences and make the survey easier.

For the study purpose schools were divided into 4 categories i.e. urban private and government schools as well as rural private and government schools. As the survey in the far away rural areas became difficult, the study is concentrated only in urban area of Islamabad and then the results were correlated and generalized for the rural areas with the help of the previous studies being done in the relevant area. Data was collected by surveys for the facilities schools provide using a list of basic facilities. For the learning outcome, generic tests and observations were conducted

for grade 5 students. English and mathematics was taken to check the learning outcome. The data set was borrowed from ASER Pakistan as it covers those indicators that will be measured in the study. Study was conducted on 10 schools operating in different areas of the city including government schools and private schools imparting primary education. Sampling unit is the school. 5 private schools and 5 government schools were randomly selected. Sampling was done using probability proportional to size. Schools having larger number of students were selected from the vicinity (Mirbahar, Ghumro, Abidi & Shah, 2016).

4. Results

From the total population of Islamabad, 48% of young people go to private schools, 26% go to government schools and more than 20% do not attend the school.

4.1 Physical Facilities

The data collected showed that all five private schools provided better physical facilities and quality teachers. They had more rooms, better drinking water facilities, toilet facilities, desks and chairs, boundary walls and electricity. The only facility which the private schools could not provide was the large play grounds as they were mainly constructed in the owner's house or a rented place (Wilkins, 2016). On the contrary government schools have large space on their disposal but the buildings and play grounds were not well maintained. All 5 private schools have boundary walls but two of government schools did not have a boundary wall which is a major concern of parents in sending their kids specially daughters to schools as it poses a serious security threat. All of them lacked one or the other basic facilities. Either, the facilities like clean drinking water and hygienic toilets were not provided or if provided standards were not up to the mark. Toilets were less in number and unhygienic. One of them did not have the proper drinking water option available. Student to teacher ratio was on average 30 to 1 in private schools and 60 to 1 in government schools. Teacher attendance was 60 percent in government schools as compared to 85 % in private schools. For the facility of rooms both of them carried their own problem and introduced a new variable i.e. size of the room compared to number of students. Private schools had more rooms but they were smaller for the number of kids in 3 schools and for government schools, rooms were spacious but too many students were made to sit in the room (Ahmed, Veinhardt, & Hemani, 2016).

Attendance of the teacher and students both is a major indicator of quality of any school and represent learning contact time. These levels were higher in private schools as compared to government schools on the day of survey. The private school facilities were found to be much better than the government schools but an important factor is noteworthy here that they were also dependent upon the vicinity of the school. One of the private schools had the provision of room coolers in the class rooms while the other just had the fans. There might be a correlation between the facilities provided by the government school and the private school in the same vicinity that the facilities provided by the private school in that area were just one level up. It shows that private schools use the facilities provided in the government school of that particular vicinity as a bench mark and give a little more than that to keep their superiority and attract admissions. This technique also increases their profit margin (Ron, Dorsi, & Petersen, 2016).

4.2 Learning Outcomes

As far as the learning outcomes are concerned, the assessments were based on the basic concepts of mathematics keeping the curriculum of government as a benchmark because different types of

curriculums are followed in different private schools and they propagate that the curriculum taught in government schools is insufficient for the said grades (Ali, 2017). English proficiency was determined through a reading text and a writing assessment based on basic knowledge. The study showed a better comprehension of mathematics concepts and more accuracy in the usage of English language among the private school students as compared to the government schools. The prerequisite decided for grade 5 students was ability to read English text and write a basic 10 line essay about “myself”. For mathematics they had to do 3-digit division. The children of private schools outperformed the children of government schools. For English language 47% of the children from private schools and 21 % from government schools could come up to the mark. For mathematics 78% students from the private schools and 59 % from the government schools could do the mathematics assessment (Khurshid, 2016).

5. Conclusion

Following the results of the study, it is worth noting that working of the private schools is much better than the working of government schools. They have high percentage of enrolment and they are providing better physical facilities and last but not the least their learning outcomes are better than the government schools. There are some other factors that can also affect the learning outcomes e.g. the household dynamics, educated parents, pre-schooling, tuition and absenteeism. If all the other factors are ignored and only facilities and learning outcomes are taken into consideration, the private school efficiency rate is higher (Awan & Zia, 2015).

Children in private schools showed a better probability of producing better outcomes. The results may prove more significant if a larger sample size is taken for study (Andrabi, Das & Khuwaja, 2008). It is also needed to be highlighted that the private school services can be considered better than government schools only if they are seen in the perspective of Pakistan. They are better only in a relative sense. Internationally, they also stand below the margin. The quality of private schools also needs major improvement. Policy development needs to cater both and devise strategies on how to maximize the learning outcomes along with the discipline issues and physical provisions to improve the state of the affairs. The focus should not be on thinking if which option is better or if private schools are blessing or a curse, but on how both private and government sector can play together and help each other to improve the state of education in Pakistan and attain the millennium goal of “education for all”. It is also stipulated in the constitution of Pakistan article 25 that education is the basic right for all. The example of Bangladesh is a lesson for us where private sector managed to get government support and is providing 98% of post primary and 54% primary level education (Jamil, 2011).

Private sector should be considered as a collaborator and not a competitor to the government for improved quality and access to education for all. This research is a humble effort to get an insight into the dynamics of private schools and how they are affecting our education system. Private schools do have a contribution that must be acknowledged. The only factor that remains unattended about them is the lack of proper legislation to keep a check on their profit building motives and protection of consumer rights being established to decrease the financial burden from the parent. The data used in the paper has limitations as it is only rural based. It can be extended to urban areas for a more detailed study in the future for establishing more accurate results (Khurshid, 2016).

6. Implications and Recommendations

Keeping in view the results found and the conclusions derived, it will be a better option for government to use its resources in improving the existing schools in terms of basic facilities and quality education to come at pace with the standards being set by private schools. Increasing the number of students for easy access to education should be handed over to the private sector with a formulation of certain policies and rules that keeps a check on their profit making aspect (Heyneman & Stern, 2015).

The results portray the positive role of private sector in the education system of Pakistan. This analysis paves the way for the further studies and relevant policy improvements. Private sector has a huge potential for improving quality and access to education. It can be said conveniently that the private schools show a huge contribution towards improvement of education standards in Pakistan. In the wake of present situation, the debate of private versus government schools should be taken seriously at policy level (Ron, Dorsi, & Petersen, 2016). We are in the state of education emergency that cannot be dealt alone by the government. Multiple contributions are required to combat the issue. The government requires private sector help to deal with the challenge of MDG goals. As government has to look into other pressing conditions like security issues, unemployment, and natural disasters to name a few, a collective action is required by all the stake holders including public, government and private sector to address the education issues (Ali, 2017).

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